

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Blessed Assurance

**Sermon Text:** Romans 8:16

**Rom. 8:16** The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

**Rom. 8:17** and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

**Main Point:** True assurance is found not by looking inward for mathematical and philosophical certainty, but by listening to the Spirit's witness, which directs our gaze away from our trembling hearts to the unshakeable sufficiency of Christ.

## **Outline:**

1. Assurance is Possible

2. Assurance Can Be Sabotaged

Trap 1: Treating Assurance Like a Math Equation

Trap 2: Seeking Certainty Instead of Hope

Trap 3: Seeking Assurance Inside Ourselves

Trap 4: Assuming Doubts Mean We're Not Saved

Trap 5: Getting Hung Up on Self-Examination

## **Introduction**

Today's passage is an excellent opportunity for us to discuss the topic of assurance. When we talk about assurance, what are we talking about?

On one level you might say that assurance is our subjective sense of security that is rooted in the objective reality of God's grace in Christ.

Maybe it's helpful to think of it this way: it's one thing to *be* secure; it's another thing to feel assured. "Secure" and "assured" are not the same things. Security is the reality; assurance is the *experience* of that reality.

Security is, "I'm on this well-built bridge that has been used by hundreds of thousands of people, that has been built by the greatest builder that exists, and that will not fall no matter how much weight is put on it, and this bridge will never fall because of that" That is security. You are objectively standing in safety.

But assurance is different. It's the *experience* of standing on that bridge and not giving in to your fear of heights or the anxiety of being so far off of the water, or thinking about the news reports you've seen about a bridge somewhere else collapsing. Assurance is the experience of actually being on the bridge and knowing and feeling that it won't fall in spite of your worst fears.

You see, those are different things. There's a difference between our security, and our *sense* of that security.

What Paul is addressing in this passage today is the experience of assurance here, and in the time I have this morning I want us to do two things that I really hope will encourage you to pursue assurance of your own salvation, but I want you to do it in a way that doesn't turn you even more in on yourself and focus you obsessively on your own heart.

So for our two parts I want us to first see that assurance is possible. Then second I want to mention some of the ways that assurance can be sabotaged.

## **1. Assurance is Possible**

First today, Paul seems to be addressing the experience of assurance. The subjective sense that this really is true that I am a child of God.

Paul speaks here of two witnesses whose work come together to give us assurance. The first witness he talks about is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bears witness, he testifies *to* a second witness, which is our own spirit.

So Paul is saying that when this witness takes place, the Spirit isn't giving us a shiver or a burning in the bosom or something experiential like that, necessarily. Instead, the Spirit is like a witness in the courtroom of the heart, deposing our doubts. So when the law says to us, "You are a sinner," the Spirit testifies something else: "Yes, but you are washed."

We need the witness of the Spirit because we're weak. Our conscience is troubled. We don't consistently live in keeping with our profession.

And so if it was just our witness, if it was just our spirit, then we would only hear testimony about our sin. And that would lead to servile fear, which is what last week's sermon was all about. We've been freed from that because of Christ, because God has adopted us, and because we aren't slaves, we're children.

But our own spirit is too weak to stand against the accusations of our conscience. That's why we need the superior witness of the Spirit to step in. Here is how Calvin puts it:

"Paul means, that the Spirit of God gives us such a testimony, that when he is our guide and teacher, our spirit is made assured of the adoption of God... otherwise our own [spirit] would never deliver us from trembling."

Now, the Roman Catholic church said (and still says) that assurance isn't possible. They say, anyone claiming to have assurance is just being presumptuous.

Why do they say that? Because Rome said, justification is based on infused grace poured into us gradually making us more righteous. You'll never be fully justified in this life, and so Rome kept people on the treadmill, never certain of whether they can be saved or not. And the result of this was a church that kept people on the hook, always uncertain, never confident, and certainly never assured, and even reprimanding those who claimed to have assurance.

And the Reformers answered, first by saying with Paul, that justification is not a process; it is something that God does for sinners. He does not *maybe* do it, or *partially* do it, and it is not a process. It is a work of God's free grace.

Now, the Reformers did agree that it is true that not everyone who is saved always has a sense of their being saved and a sense of their assurance. You can be truly saved without feeling saved.

But the Reformers also said that it is possible for us to have “an infallible assurance of faith,” but that if we don’t have that sense of assurance that doesn’t mean we’re not saved. They said assurance is possible, but they were also careful to say, it is not of the *essence* of faith.

Paul today is saying that this assurance is possible. Rome’s idea of assurance was an inward-looking examination: “Look at your life. Is it holy enough? Almost certainly it isn’t, so keep working. Keep doing ceremonies. Keep going to confession. Keep praying to the saints. Pay your indulgences. But in all these things, you still can’t be assured, even if you did look within and like what you see.”

Rome said, “Assurance isn’t possible in this life.”

The Reformers, on the other hand, looking to Paul, said, “Look at the Spirit’s witness. Does he point you to Christ? Then you are a son.” In other words, the Reformers found assurance by starting with Christ and what he has done and moving from him and what he has done, to us and our experience.

You might think of it this way: the "witness" of the Spirit often feels less like a thunderclap and more like a gentle stubbornness. It is that quiet refusal in the believer's heart to let go of Christ, even when they feel like a failure. That *is* the Spirit testifying.

What *Christ* has done is paramount. Without Christ and his work, we really have no ground for any hope. What we *feel* about what Christ has done is important but not necessary. As I say, you can have true faith without having a sense of assurance of faith.

I can tell you this: there is no greater assurance in all the world than the act of actually looking to Christ and trusting him. Micro-analyzing our looking, and our hoping, and scrutinizing our faith can at times be counter-productive. And I think many Christians do great harm to themselves by not seeing assurance in a healthy and biblical way.

This actually leads to our second point. And we’re going to spend a lot of time on this because it’s so important.

## 2. Assurance Can Be Sabotaged

The second point for today is, I want to focus on some ways that we sabotage our sense of assurance.

### *Trap 1: Treating Assurance Like a Math Equation*

Assurance is a personal experience, not a scientific or mathematical reality to be solved. But when we assume that assurance is like that, we can often hurt ourselves deeply when we never find that satisfying moment where we look at the equation on the board and say, “Ah.  $E=MC^2$ . Yes. That’s a valid equation. Now I can go through the rest of my life never wondering whether I have assurance.”

I think Francis Turretin is very helpful here. Turretin says we should distinguish between *objective certainty* and *subjective certainty*. And what he meant by that was that there are things that are true no matter what you think about them. (God is good. That’s true no matter what you feel.) That’s *objective* certainty. It’s the truth of the thing itself (said Turretin).

But then, he said, there is also *subjective* certainty. And that is our own personal *sense* of what is true. And what Turretin said was, God’s covenant is objectively true and immovable. But our sense of God’s covenant fluctuates because we are weak vessels. So the first trap I am mentioning here is the trap of confusing objective and subjective assurance. Do not confuse the stability of a rock with the trembling of the person standing on it.

What Paul describes in this passage today is the subjective experience of certainty. But what happens is, we assume that our knowledge of our own assurance is going to be as certain as the objective part that God does in Christ. And when we mix those up, we miss the fact that this is Paul describing a daily experience, not a once for all solution or proof.

No; in reality, our assurance is bound to ebb and flow. There are times when we *should* have a diminished sense of assurance. Maybe we just neglect our faith, maybe we fall into serious sin and spend a season entertaining it and coddling it instead of mortifying it. Maybe something happens in our lives where our sense of God’s love is diminished for one reason or another. All of these things do happen,

which is why the Westminster Confession says that our assurance “is in many ways shaken, diminished, and interrupted.”

So one of the traps we fall into is treating assurance like a math equation when really assurance is an experience. The ebb and flow of feeling assured does not mean the *fact* of salvation is actually ebbing and flowing. The clouds may be obscuring the sun today, but that doesn't mean the sun has ceased to exist.

### *Trap 2: Seeking Certainty Instead of Hope*

I want to mention a second trap that is similar to trap 1, but I want to treat it separately because it's a different angle. Maybe we don't treat assurance like a math equation, but we are seeking this philosophical sort of certainty where we think, “I won't believe it until I can absolutely nail everything down and be 100% sure beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

In other words, trap 2 is, I want philosophical certainty where there's no possibility of anything else.

And it makes sense why we do this. We live in a world that treats skepticism as a high virtue. From the time we are kids, we are taught not to be gullible, not to take people at their word, and to constantly fear being swindled. But when we bring that cultural skepticism into our relationship with God, we make a terrible mistake. We start to think that constantly doubting our salvation is a sign of intellectual honesty, when really it's just a worldly habit. Herman Bavinck called this impulse of our age a "lust for doubt" that has become a soul-sickness.

But if we're waiting even to quiet our *imagination*s about what could be true or might be true or what might not be true, then we will never be able to rest. Because we're finite. We are limited. We don't know everything. Unlike God we can't take in all of truth and know it. We live in a linear fashion from one moment to the next. So if we suddenly think that unlike the rest of life assurance will leave us with no room for doubts or questions, then what we're doing is, we're setting ourselves up for confusion and we're falling into another trap.

One of the most helpful things that I've read from Peter Martyr Vermigli is his discussion of assurance, where he says that the answer to doubt isn't certainty: it's

hope. And hope comes from a living faith where we are placing our confidence in Christ and not ourselves. In doubt, we are fixated on the abstract *idea* of the object of our faith rather than the object itself. It's like the difference between thinking about thinking about Jesus vs trusting in Jesus.

So we get frozen at the *idea* of faith instead of just having faith. We're chasing certainty instead of hope when we do that. And in the process we ruin the possibility of having *either*.

Because of this, the Bible is full of commands to hope, not because God wants to give us more burdens, but because (as Vermigli says) "he saw that our unfaithful heart labors with perpetual hesitation." And then Vermigli says, "When we doubt our salvation, we have no other weapons to overcome this temptation except hope alone, which arises from living faith." When he says "living faith," he means that we keep trusting and believing from one moment to the next. Faith isn't a stagnant pool; it's a flowing stream. It's something that keeps going from day to day. Sometimes it gets blocked up, sometimes it dwindles down to a little dribble during dry seasons, but it's still active and keeps going. Faith is not something we stockpile. It's a flowing fountain that keeps coming to us by God's grace.

And so my encouragement is not to make it our goal to have certainty. Instead, make it your goal to seek hope. And what God tells us is that we will find it in the face of Jesus Christ. Because the more you know him, the more reasons you have for hope. You will find that to be a far greater remedy to your doubts or fears than trying to find mathematical and philosophical certainty.

### *Trap 3: Seeking Assurance Inside Ourselves (intra nos vs extra nos)*

For the Reformers, they responded to Rome's obsession with holiness as the basis of our assurance by saying that the basis of our assurance isn't something in us, it is the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is Christ and his work that is the true basis for assurance. Without the imputed righteousness of Christ, there is no real basis for hope because we will have to look in here to find hope, and we won't find enough to stave off our fear and anxiety.

So if it's a trap to look inside ourselves to find assurance, then what is the answer? The Reformers were very clear: we find it outside of ourselves. We don't find it by looking in here. That's why Paul says that it is the Spirit who bears witness with our Spirit. The source of our assurance is outside, not inside. Now, that does relate to a fourth trap that can happen in our quest for assurance.

#### *Trap 4: Assuming Doubts Mean We're Not Saved*

Many Christians are afraid of having doubts or questions, because they think it's a sign that they must not be saved if they have them. But we have many examples from Scripture of faith that is still weak or wavering, but still real faith. The man who told Jesus "I believe; help my unbelief" is one example. Peter trusted God but he failed a tremendous amount. The Bible is full of these examples that show us that the experience of faith isn't a smooth straight road; it's rocky and twisty and difficult. That difficulty doesn't mean it's not real.

Calvin gives voice to this: "Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety." Calvin is saying that by its very nature in this life, faith is a perpetual struggle. We are not assured because we have ceased to doubt; we are assured because, even in our doubt, Christ is there and he loves us, and we look to him, however weakly.

This fear of doubt also misses the fact that when we ask questions, we grow.

If you take your doubts as a sign that you're not saved, then no one can be assured, because everyone lives in the moment, and as long as we are sinners this side of glory, our sense of assurance will ebb and flow. So please don't fall into the trap of thinking that doubts are always a sign that we're not saved.

#### *Trap 5: Getting Hung Up on Self-Examination*

So the Scripture does tell us in 2 Peter 1:10 that we are supposed to make our calling and election sure. So how can we do that if we just said we're not supposed to find assurance inside ourselves? Isn't Peter telling us to look inside ourselves?

Well the Puritan writers like William Ames and Richard Sibbes say that the mistake happens when we try to make our calling and election sure by looking within and saying, “Do I really believe?” And they said the core mistake is in practice when we do that apart from Christ. So we look at ourselves without looking at Christ. Sort of like Peter on the water when he looked at the waves instead of Jesus.

To make this point they distinguished between two kinds of acts of faith. One is the direct act of faith. This is where we hear about Christ in the sermon or in Scripture, and we fix our gaze on him and feel hopeful because “we’re looking to Jesus.” That’s a strong place to stand.

And what Ames and Sibbes (among others) said is, there is another act of faith, which is a *reflexive* act (and I think the simpler name for this would just be “self-examination”). And this is the look at our own heart where we challenge ourselves with the question: “do I really believe? Or have I fooled myself?” And this is the one that gets people so hung up, because here’s what we often do: we do the self-examination and ask ourselves, “do I believe?” But we often do it separated from the primary act. So we aren’t looking to Christ with hope while we ask ourselves if we’re looking to Christ with hope.

And the healthiest thing is for us to have faith that is both actual and reflexive.

See, here’s what happens: we start with the major premise. We know that if someone has the fruits of the spirit, then they are in Christ. Then we move to the minor premise: we see imperfect but real fruits of the spirit in our lives. Then we conclude: Therefore I am in Christ.

But there’s a danger in this. If we *start* with the minor premise... if we *start* on a fruit hunt, we will always end up despairing somewhere along the line because our obedience is stained with sin; we can’t find a pure act in our heart. We’ll always find our good deeds tinged with mixed motives.

And so, if we’re *going* to do a fruit hunt, we should do it in light of God’s grace. The Reformers put it like this: the important thing is not the perfection of our faith, but the sincerity of it. The reality of it.

We often do worse the more we self-obsess. When she was a baby, my daughter, Genesis, started walking without realizing it. She would pick something up and

then cruise on the furniture. Well one day, Genesis was walking along the coffee table and just started walking into the middle of the room. The key was she was holding onto a clothes pin and had convinced herself that she was still standing at the table. But Genesis was straight up walking while holding a toy. And I remember pointing and saying, "Hey look! You're walking!" Genesis looks down. Looks at her hands. Looks at the table way over there and just collapses on the ground. Amazing. Hilarious. Adorable. But also, man do I relate.

Sometimes I think when we look down at our hands, that's when things get the shakiest. Our assurance is strongest when we are gazing at Christ, delighting in his perfections, rejoicing in his sacrifice for sinners, singing hymns of praise to him, hearing his promises declared, meditating on the love of the Father, celebrating the grace of the Spirit and his presence in us.

You know when our assurance is weakest? When we get hung up on *us*. We look down at our hands and go, "Wait a minute. I'm not at the table anymore. I'm walking." And that can often become an occasion where we just collapse on the floor.

I'm not saying that there is no place for examining the fruit of our lives. In fact, taking an honest, intentional look at our own hearts is a vital part of the Christian life. We need to examine ourselves so we can spot creeping sins early, pulling those weeds up before they take deep root in our lives. We also need to look inward so we can cultivate what the Puritans called a "sanctified memory". This means deliberately reading the story of our lives to trace God's hand, remembering his past faithfulness, and giving thanks for his providential care over us. When we do this rightly, examining ourselves doesn't lead to despair; it drives us to confession, repentance, and a renewed sense of gospel assurance. And in fact, when we refuse to do this, we are in some sense robbing ourselves of an opportunity to experience a sense of assurance. Because when we see fruit in our lives, it does built that sense that "I really do belong to Jesus." I'm faltering and failing, I'm not what I should be, but I do nonetheless belong to Jesus.

The danger comes when we confuse this healthy, scripture-guided self-examination with morbid self-obsession. *Healthy* examination always drives us outward to the cross. Morbid introspection traps us inside our own heads, tearing

ourselves apart as we anxiously analyze our own motives and our lack of good deeds.

Let's see if this illustration is helpful: Imagine a dark room with a mirror on the wall. If you look at the mirror (your heart) in the dark, you see nothing. If you try to polish the mirror to make it generate light, you still see nothing.

But if you open the curtains to let the Sun (Christ) shine in, the mirror suddenly lights up. When you look at the mirror now, you *are* looking "into ourselves" (at the mirror), but what you are seeing is the reflection of the "outside of ourselves" (the Sun).

We need that light if we're going to see what's really there. We try looking at our heart apart from Christ? We'll see nothing.

How many people on a quest for assurance keep looking in here when they need to look up and out there to Jesus Christ? How many of you need that reminder of where real assurance is found?

You see, morbid introspection says, "I will analyze my heart to see if I have enough faith." And the result is paralysis and doubt. Because all I'm seeing is ME!

But a Gospel *reflexive* faith says, "I will set my eyes on Christ, and *then* notice that I am believing." Like checking if you're breathing after a run. And the result of that is activity and confidence. It's the opposite of morbid introspection.

## Conclusion

I realize that this message has been focused on the subject of assurance, but I want to end by saying: assurance is a blessing, but it is not the currency that buys your salvation.

The Reformers used to say that faith is like a hand. It is the hand of a beggar reaching out to receive the gold of the King. Some of you have a steady hand—you have strong assurance, and you can see the gold of Christ clearly. That is a gift.

But some of you have a trembling hand. Your temperament, your anxiety, or your difficult season makes you shake. You doubt. You wonder. But hear this clearly:

**The trembling hand receives the gold just as much as the steady hand does.**

It is not the steadiness of your hand that saves you; it is the value of the Gold. It is not the strength of your faith or assurance that rescues you; it is the strength of the Savior.

God offers us assurance because He wants to give us *rest* from the endless mental treadmill of self-validation. We do not have to carry the crushing burden of proving our own authenticity. We can find our certainty in the Lord instead of within ourselves.

So if you leave here today still wrestling with some doubt, or struggling with a sense of assurance, my prayer is that you won't despair. If you are clinging to Christ, even with a shaking hand, then you belong to him and are absolutely secure. The Spirit doesn't witness to you by making you perfect. He witnesses to you by keeping you believing. And that is enough, because Jesus Christ is a gracious and glorious and perfect Savior.

*Let's pray.*